

**MANCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION  
MANCHESTER BOARD OF DIRECTORS  
JOINT MEETING  
With  
SMARTR COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION**

**December 3, 2013**

7:00 p.m.  
Lincoln Center

**PRESENT:** Board of Education: Crockett, Cruz, Hagenow, Leon, Luxenberg, Pattacini, Pazda, Scappaticci, Stafford, Thames

Board of Directors: Devanney, Diana, Gates, Holmes, Kissmann, Moran, O'Neill, Pelletier, Tweedie

**ALSO PRESENT:** Interim Superintendent of Schools Dr. Kisiel; SMARTR members not members of the Boards above including: Megan Flick, Brian Murphy, Alan Strong; Town staff including: S. Shanley, C. Till, R. Zeigler; Architects: J. Hoagland, R. Luther

**OPENING**

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 p.m. by Mayor L. Diana. All in attendance participated in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, led by Mr. Diana.

It was explained by the mayor that the meeting would be co-chaired by both himself and Mr. Pattacini, of the Board of Education. Tonight we are here to hear the recommendation of the SMARTR Committee. Members of both boards will be allowed to ask questions. No public comment will be allowed at this time, though there will be future meetings set up for public feedback.

**Mr. Pattacini** thanked the SMARTR members, especially the non-political members, for their work. This is the first step in the process and he noted there will be an opportunity in the future for public engagement. Tonight we are here to listen and hear what SMARTR has gone through to come to their recommendation. Mr. Pattacini, a recent member of SMARTR, has been very impressed with the committee and the level of detail and research they have undergone. We are fortunate to have people willing to dedicate their time to develop this plan. Mr. Pattacini further thanked the Board of Directors and Board of Education for taking a step in finding a cost-effective way to address the problems in the elementary schools, some of which have not been addressed for

twenty years. He is hopeful we can come together for a solution and is excited about the prospect.

**Mr. Diana** introduced the members of SMARTR who were present this evening, including: Mr. Strong, Ms. Pelletier, Mr. Tweedie, Mr. Gates, Mr. Pattacini, Mr. Leon (previous member), Mr. Crockett – Chair, Ms. Hagenow, and Mr. Thames. He also pointed out that many meetings were also attended by Town Manager Shanley, Dr. Kisiel, Chris Till, and Rich Zeigler, all of whom provided resources to the committee.

**Ms. Flick** and **Mr. Murphy** presented a Power Point outlining the SMARTR recommendation and timeline. The full presentation is available on the town website. The resolution reads:

Resolution of the SMARTR Committee Reviewing Its Work and  
Recommending a Direction to the Board of Education and Board of Directors

WHEREAS, the SMARTR Committee has met over 30 times since April 2012 during which time the Committee has considered and balanced the practical implications of a host of sometimes conflicting legal mandates and state regulations that have come into effect over the last 40 years, and, importantly, fiscal realities. Each of these greatly influence and inform a sustainable elementary school infrastructure within which to provide the primary priority and goal, a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environment for future generations of Manchester children; and

WHEREAS, the Committee has considered:

1. The condition of the current elementary school infrastructure, its age and compliance with contemporary standards, and the space inefficiency and cost of the existing stock;
2. Soaring construction costs based on required standards that now well exceeds \$400 per square foot;

3. The State reimbursement formula that discourages construction/rehabilitation of smaller schools and how taxpayers can benefit from the best reimbursement rates while keeping class sizes the same at 17-22 students;
4. The impact of federal laws such as the American with Disabilities Act (1990) and various special education laws such as IDEA (1974) on facility design, classroom size and layout;
5. The impacts of the multibillion dollar investment in magnet schools as part of the State's effort to comply with Sheff vs. O'Neill, the court mandated desegregation of school districts designed to provide students with equitable educational opportunities and access to public education that does not promote racial or ethnic isolation, often moving students out of the suburbs into cities and vice-versa;
6. Statutorily required racial balancing within Manchester schools by individual schools to reflect the community population demographics of the Town. Specifically, "a school is out of balance if the minority population is 25% above or below that of the district as a whole";
7. Code requirements which mandate younger school children to be in a facility which has direct "at grade" egress out of the building (ground floor only);
8. A strong desire to maintain a "neighborhood" structure;
9. The need for parity of facilities for all elementary school students in Manchester.

WHEREAS, the Committee has found

1. Nearly 1,000 students leave for magnet, charter or private schools from Manchester daily (costing \$2 Million a year), including one with an 650 student enrollment;

2. The Robertson District is experiencing the greatest increase in enrollment of young children town wide;
3. Mandated racial balancing currently requires a continuous process of redistricting elementary school students among numerous facilities;
4. For the size of schools being considered by SMARTR, research indicates that the enrollment capacity of an elementary school does not have a negative impact on learning. Research does suggest that class size, quality of teaching and leadership may influence academic achievement;
5. Manchester's current elementary school infrastructure (9 schools), to be rebuilt as Highland Park School was ("like new" and similar size), would require approximately \$150 Million at a reduced reimbursement rate (just over 50%), and many years, costing nearly \$75 Million locally, in part due to State reimbursement policies;
6. Some of the district's schools experience significant conflict between buses, cars and walkers due to their design being in an era when cars and buses were far fewer;
7. The approximate size of an elementary school that could accommodate the same classroom sizes as currently (17-22 students) in the manner educationally appropriate as determined by the Superintendent of Schools, that also optimizes State reimbursement, is approximately 530 students;
8. The Cheney Historic District Commission and State Historic Preservation Commission are committed to protect the physical structure of the old Washington School itself, not the concept of a neighborhood school/green space/recreation space, and, a protracted legal battle with the Attorney General's

Office would likely be necessary should the old Washington School be considered for removal;

9. Demographic and enrollment studies show that all SMARTR Committee recommendations can be achieved by expanding current neighborhood boundaries and maintaining geographic continuity;

10. Bennet Academy has excess capacity that can and should be well utilized.

The SMARTR Committee therefore recommends:

1. The establishment of a 5/6 Academy which the Superintendent describes as “an excellent developmental and educational fit” at the Bennet Academy site utilizing and restoring the currently vacant “Cheney” Building as a means to recreate, at historic “education square”, an educational campus environment that reduces transitions, fully optimizes an already bonded like new building while using a successful education model that has been tested elsewhere;

A. Such an academy should allow for, essentially, a new state of the art school for 500+ 5<sup>th</sup> graders, in the Cheney Building, for a local cost of \$6-\$7 Million due to using existing Bennet non-classroom amenities compared to local cost of \$13-\$14 Million for a “stand alone” new school; and

B. Would provide for a K-4 model for the other elementary schools and frees up significant space to allow for more focused investments, outlined below, saving one third of construction costs and even more for the local cost share due to State reimbursements optimization;

2. Ensuring that Highland Park School, after the 5<sup>th</sup> grade has moved, is occupied at the level required by the education specifications that were done for State reimbursement so that reimbursement is not compromised;

3. Providing for a “like new” renovation and expansion of Robertson School at a capacity of approximately 530 to optimize State reimbursement at 65% and accommodate the growing population, while maintaining class sizes in Manchester at between 17 and 22 students;
4. The identification of either the Washington School site or the Verplanck School site for a new or like new renovation school also at 530 students with classes of 17-22 students;
5. The expansion of the current “neighborhood” boundaries to ensure as many elementary school students can be accommodated in brand new facilities in a relatively short order of time while maintaining contiguousness of school boundaries as neighborhoods;
6. Based on the above, determine the excess capacity of our elementary school facilities (estimated to be 100,000 square feet) and decommission up to two elementary schools, thereby reducing future capital and maintenance costs;
7. The issuance of bonds over the next several years to accomplish these goals in an amount of approximately \$90-\$100 Million, with the local share being approximately \$40 Million, which is a 50% savings local share based on optimizing State reimbursement and not having to do “like new” renovations (at \$35 Million) to two additional schools;
8. Continued exploration of Nathan Hale School as a magnet school or other appropriate use.

## **QUESTIONS:**

**Mr. Stafford** wondered what would happen if we follow this plan and the schools become racially unbalanced at some point in the future again. Mr. Murphy stated that students would have to be moved, however this plan

provides a cushion so for the foreseeable future that should not be an issue. Currently, maintaining racial balance often requires shuffling students between schools.

Mr. Stafford wondered about the code requirement in #7, requiring at grade egress for students. He wondered if that meant that we are currently out of code on many of our schools. Mr. Murphy explained that requirement is only for the lower grades, and was meant to explain why Kindergarten classes need to be on ground level.

Mr. Stafford wondered why the plan is to expand Robertson and not Waddell. Mr. Murphy explained that the population growth is in the area of Robertson School, and the footprint of the school, along with the acreage, were desirable aspects. Ms. Flick also noted we looked at schools in most need of critical repairs. Mr. Stafford said he had read somewhere that Ms. Pelletier had stated that by February we would be ready to pick schools. He wondered if that meant pick the schools to close or the schools to be put on the referendum. The mayor asked that questions be directed to SMARTR. Mr. Stafford restated, asking if SMARTR would recommend a vote on closing schools by February. Mr. Murphy stated that the Board of Education will decide those things. However, SMARTR felt the town should know the whole plan before the first phase is put up for referendum, so they can understand the whole plan. The actual number of referendums is up for the Boards to decide, however the public should realize Cheney Bennet is not a project unto itself, it is part of a larger plan.

**Mr. Leon** appreciated the hard work of those on SMARTR, noting the committee is voluntary. He felt the plan was thorough, however stopped short of recommending which schools to close. That disappointed Mr. Leon. Mr. Murphy stated it is clear from the demographer's report that the schools to close would be Waddell and either Verplanck or Washington. SMARTR had originally focused on renovating Washington, however with the recent challenges presented for that site, attention was turned toward a basic plan for Verplanck as another option. Mr. Leon, though he would prefer a brand new school on the Washington site, stated that due to the historic issues at Washington, feels Verplanck makes sense. He noted that the plan completion is for the year 2020. He wondered if Washington would last another 5-6 years to last that point without major investment. He does not believe it will. Mr. Murphy stated if the Board endorses this plan, it gives the town the ability to possibly defer some work at Robertson to save money. Mr. Leon does not want to invest in Washington if the building will close or be renovated. However, he is not sure it will last another five years. He does not want what happened to Nathan Hale to happen to Washington either. Mr. Murphy pointed out that if the plan is approved, the discussion about what has to be done without major financial impact, to keep the building going for a specific amount of time, will be had. Mr. Leon wondered what the plan might be for the two closed buildings. Mr. Murphy stated SMARTR

has not discussed that, and that may be future work for SMARTR or for the Town building reuse committee. He suggested one possibility is to move Central Office to one of the buildings. If that were to occur, there would be a possibility of Robertson using the space currently occupied by Central Office, which would alter that plan.

Mr. Leon referred to the plan to upgrade to some extent the balance of the elementary schools and wondered where that money would come from, would it be added to one of the referendums? Mr. Murphy imagined it would be added to a referendum and the timeline and scope of work is yet to be determined.

Mr. Leon noted that this plan calls for three separate referendums. He wondered what if the first passes and the subsequent one doesn't? Mr. Murphy stated the town can put up one referendum, or two instead of three, however what is important is for the town residents to see the whole plan and understand this is not a "one and done" project. Voters need to educate themselves on the plan and see that overall it saves money and make an educated decision on the referendum. Mr. Leon continued to express concern over having separate referendums. Mr. Shanley noted that the recommended three referendums is one way to go, or we could frontload the project in one referendum.

**Mr. Moran** thanked Mr. Crockett and the committee. He noted he is a neighborhood school guy and this just stretches the neighborhoods. The next step, which is the hardest, is to decide which schools to close. He hopes as we move forward that we look at statistics. He noted that Waddell is a big homeowner neighborhood, versus Robertson, which has a more transient population with many rental units. It will be important to Waddell to look at the reasons for this choice. Mr. Murphy reviewed that the Superintendent engaged a demographer to figure out the best plan and that was considered in drawing the lines.

Mr. Moran pointed out the cost of like-new renovations at all the schools, keeping them the same size, at a cost of \$120 million, versus this plan at \$60 million. He also noted the aggressive timeline to accomplish these SMARTR goals by 2020, instead of taking 15-20 years or more to renovate all the schools, at which point some schools would again need work. It is important to have the public know that the SMARTR plan is feasible regarding both money and time. Mr. Murphy pointed out he does not want to mislead, the additional funds to renovate the other schools would not make them like new, however that might be addressed at a later date.

Mr. Moran wondered about Board of Education policy regarding school closure. He fears a new Board may say, in six years, no school closure. He feels it is very important to consider this. Mr. Moran appreciates the work of SMARTER and felt the presentation was a clear, understandable plan.

**Ms. Pazda** felt the presentation was informative. She can see the incredible work and thought that went into this and she was pleased to see the aggressive timeline. She questioned having the design phase after the referendum. She noted that curriculum impacts school design and it is important to partner with curriculum experts in Central Office while working on facilities planning. She pointed out the Highland Park project that had to go back for a second referendum for more money before proceeding because the design plan was not thorough prior to the first referendum. Mr. Murphy noted that SMARTR is aware of the HPS situation and that was why money was bonded for architect design fees on both Cheney/Bennet and Washington and Robertson previously. A schematic design is very costly so if we want that included in the reimbursement it must be done after the referendum, but the estimate is done prior to the referendum.

**Ms. Holmes** is beginning to realize the plan and approves of most of it, but has questions around Waddell School. She notes Waddell is a tight school community. She wondered how the school would close, would it be phased out or just close at the end of a particular school year. Ms. Holmes further stated that Washington is a unique school and she would like the building to be preserved historically and reused in an appropriate manner, even if not as a school. She notes if Central Office could be moved to one of the closed schools, maybe their building (attached to Robertson) could be used as part of the Robertson renovation. She asked which schools have had recent repairs or renovations done. Mr. Shanley stated he could get a list of that for review.

**Ms. Cruz** appreciated the presentation and thanked the SMARTR committee and the presenters. Her concern is whether we have a Plan B if the first phase fails. Mr. Murphy stated if the Cheney Bennet project is not approved everything else stops because the plans are for K-4. Ms. Cruz wondered why a Plan B has not been discussed. Mr. Strong stated it would be non-productive to focus on Plan B, the focus has to assume that Phase I passes. Mr. Shanley pointed out that part of the issue is limited resources. It is very expensive to retain architects for these projects and we had \$200,000 at this point. Ms. Cruz pointed out that she posed the question because the community needs to understand that we need to pass Phase I in order to move forward and there is no Plan B. Phase I is critical.

**Ms. Pelletier**, a member of SMARTR, agreed Phase I is critical, having 5<sup>th</sup> grade move out of the elementary schools and going to a K-4 model suggested by the Board of Education. This model drove the decisions SMARTR made. A lot of thought has gone into this. Ms. Pelletier pointed out that in the 80s and 90s the "All Schools" plan had failed. Upon that failure, we did one renovation every 8 years on average. Now we face \$20-30 million just to fix and patch the problems, and that cost continues to rise. Our elementary school buildings are lagging behind and we think this is the best plan. If this fails, the other option is

to continue to piecemeal renovate one building at a time, which will cost much more and take much longer.

Ms. Pelletier went on to point out that this is an aggressive timeline and is cost effective. It will cause critical decisions to be made by the Board of Education. Clear on the timeline is the call for public forums to be held December through February. It was not SMARTR's charge to decide which schools to close – that is a Board of Education decision. The community needs an idea as Cheney Bennet moves forward. Look at the plan. It first started as a puzzle with redistricting, mandates by the state, the reality of test scores and the real estate market. In the process as one problem is solved another pops up. Over the past two years all the pieces are finally fitting together. This is the best plan. It achieves all the barriers, is cost effective, provides a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environment in a timely manner, and takes into consideration a 65% reimbursement from the state instead of 50%. We are competing with magnet schools that get 80% reimbursement. Ms. Pelletier pointed out the state looks at raw square footage and expanding that based on themes will impact the numbers. We need to create better learning environments.

**Mr. Strong** noted we asked the Board of Education early on what the focus should be. They directed us to the population growth in the North end and Washington, and told us to focus primarily on Robertson and Washington. The discussion of closing two schools came after looking at the excess square footage after the redesign and the demographic study, which showed which two schools.

**Ms. O'Neill** stated that while this is probably not the charge of the SMARTR committee, she wondered we used to be a district of 5 title and 5 non-title schools, now 4 title and 5 non-title. Would this plan change any of this? Dr. Kisiel replied that the money follows the child and it is all based on socioeconomic data. Ms. O'Neill brought up Pre-K, stating she keeps hearing that in the future we will be required to educate 3 and 4 year-olds. Dr. Kisiel has raised that issue, however other than providing for space in the renovated schools for 'future expansion', we cannot plan for something that is not currently required, as we would not get reimbursement for that. Ms. O'Neill feels that Verplanck, a one story school, would be ideal for a 3-4 year old Pre-K if preschool becomes mandated. She notes the town has to deal with abandoned buildings, including Nathan Hale. She wants to use an empty building for other, possibly mandated, use. Dr. Kisiel pointed out that even Waddell has one level and could be used for that in the future. Dr. Kisiel stated he does not see preschool being mandated in the next 3-4 years. But again the space has been identified for future use. Mr. Murphy reminded us that it cannot be included in the plan as we would get no reimbursement, but it is earmarked as future use.

Ms. O'Neill was flabbergasted to think of closing Waddell just as we have spent a fortune redeveloping Broad Street. She also questioned some renovations done to Waddell several years ago and wondered if we would owe any money back to the state if the building is abandoned. She also wanted to know when the Bennet cafeteria expansion would be planned, wondering if it would be a summer project. Mr. Murphy stated students would not be there for most of the work, however they would remain at Bennet while work was being done at Cheney. Ms. O'Neill pointed out a concern about lunch waves starting very early and running late, and Mr. Murphy pointed out that was why the cafeteria needed to be expanded, to avoid that. Ms. O'Neill wondered about the statement about not needing to expand core facilities such as cafeterias for the elementary schools up to 530 students. Mr. Murphy stated the plans call for enlarging the cafeteria a little, but not a need to double their size.

**Mr. Tweedie** thanked the presenters and non-elected members of SMARTR. He pointed out this is a very good plan that addresses the issues that need to be addressed, providing a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environment, racial balance – which we have no choice but to address, and is our best effort to keep neighborhood schools. We need to get our school buildings up to speed with the surrounding towns to appeal to the public. If Cheney fails we have a bigger problem. If we go back to renovating one school at a time – if the voters don't have faith in this plan - they will not want to spend more money renovating one school at a time, especially those schools that do not benefit them. This plan moves Manchester forward and we will be better off as a town.

**Mr. Pattacini**, a latecomer to the SMARTR committee, asked the committee many questions when he started. He reminds us that Bennet has only 500 students and is very under-utilized. This is an opportunity to more effectively use that space and to renovate an abandoned building (Cheney). The Board of Education has looked at the viability of single year schools and many Connecticut districts are abandoning this to move to two year schools. It takes time for students to feel connected to their school community and the educational value in a 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade academy is a great move for our community. He notes other schools in the state have the same problem and those communities have dealt with this and recognize the need for larger schools. Ms. Flick agreed, noting we looked to other communities for their innovative concepts. We had representatives from Waterford come speak to SMARTR. They spoke of the need to get the community on board and establish buy-in as the project was underway. They moved from five elementary schools to three and they feel they are much better now for it.

Mr. Pattacini noted that the Board of Education will take up the issue of timing regarding school closures and decisions. He wondered if possibly the Robertson and Verplanck projects could be flipped, so that the issue of whether Washington could hang on another five years could be shortened. He wondered if that

possibility had been considered. Mr. Murphy felt that Robertson was first up due to the questions presented on the other site at the time, but maybe it would be better to switch them. If we did move Central Office out, the Robertson plan may be tweaked, so it may work better to switch them for that reason as well. Mr. Pattacini supports the plan – he stated it is not perfect, but it is well thought out and well researched.

**Mr. Crockett** pointed out Craig Powers from Waterford presented to SMARTR back in July and that all presentations are available on the website, accessible through the town website, for the public's review. He thanked each member of SMARTR, noting it has been a long 18 months of meeting every two weeks, sometimes more. We have had many presentations during that time. He reviewed that SMARTR has 13 people, including four Board of Ed members, four Board of Directors, four members of the public and one from the building committee. It was difficult to come to an agreement. He noted that SMARTR is an advisory committee and has no authority. The boards can change anything. Mr. Crockett pointed out that the Cheney building has been vacant for years and this plan makes it a productive part of Main Street again. He notes that the committee had limited resources with which to work and he thanked the town staff for their help in stretching those. We need to pass Cheney/Bennett or our schools will continue to deteriorate into even worse shape. There are tax implications and we have reviewed the Manchester 2020 plan, we did our homework. He hopes the community appreciates our efforts.

**Mr. Diana** thanked Mr. Crockett for leading SMARTR. He notes the educational world is competitive and we need to get on board and look to the future. Both boards need to get behind this plan. Mayor Diana pointed out the abandoned Nathan Hale and notes this will happen again if we do not do something. He suggested there are many uses for closed schools, including the need for more senior housing. He stated many old schools are repurposed, including the building we are in currently. We cannot afford to maintain all the schools we have now and the state helps make renovating more affordable with reimbursements. This is an effective plan, a phenomenal plan. If the town people don't support this the children of this community will suffer. We need good schools to have a solid town to have a good tax base – it is all connected. He supports the plan and he hopes everyone else does.

**The Mayor called for a motion to adjourn.**

**Mr. Tweedie moved and Mr. Leon seconded the motion to adjourn the meeting.**

**All voted in favor.**

**Adjournment 8:47 p.m.**

Respectfully submitted,

Jason Scappaticci  
Board Secretary

Rudy Kissmann  
Board Secretary